

“Labor & Love: A Labor Day Reflection”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
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“Do What You Do, Love What You Love.”

From a blog by Camille Rankine  
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Once when I acknowledged to another poet that, if given the opportunity (i.e. through sudden windfall of cash via lottery winnings, discovery of buried treasure, money tree, or similar), I probably wouldn't work at all, she said, “You see, you're buying into the idea that poetry isn't work.” Which isn't quite what I meant. Yes, of course, I'd still write poetry, but I still wouldn't be getting paid for it. Not in any real way, not in a way that would sufficiently cover my electricity bill or supply me with the monthly sacrifice demanded of me by the monster of my student loans. Because, as we all know, poetry doesn't pay that way. ...

I wondered at the way this poet chafed at the idea that poetry could be considered something other than work. I think work is something we, as Americans, are a little in love with.

I've been working at some job or another since I was fifteen. There is value in that work... The kind of work you work hard at, not because you love it, but because you have to, and, for some of us, you want to do it well. But that kind of work isn't what defines me. Yet, so often, your work is understood as who you are, as the most valuable thing you have to offer society.

Being a poet, I feel as if I have two jobs—the one that feeds my bank account, and the one that feeds the all those intangible parts of me.

.....

We are in downtown Los Angeles riding down the escalator in a big, blocky, modern building, the kind that scoffs at exterior walls and instead has glass from top to bottom. Those of us on the inside can see out but no one on the outside can see in.

On the inside, this is what I see: many people moving about with great purpose and intention. Actually, it feels more like NYC than Los Angeles.

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As we're riding down that escalator surrounded by purpose, light streaming in, voices echoing as though we are in a long, hollow tunnel, I notice these words written on the wall in front of us: "Do what you love."

Is it meant to be ironic, I wonder? But this place doesn't seem to be one that would go in for irony. This is baffling.

That it is placed here confirms the ubiquitous nature of the idea. Inexplicably, this encouragement to do what we love seems to be everywhere, like CVS stores.

"Do what you love."

In 2005 Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple gave a commencement speech that is often quoted. Here's the most often quoted part:

Jobs said ...

*You've got to find what you love. And that is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do.*

That apparently played well at Stanford University in 2005 but increasingly – these 15 years, one Great Recession later and now in the midst of a pandemic and economic meltdown – increasingly "Do what you love" seems even more elitist than it would have sounded to, say, someone like me even in 2005.

Someone like me, fortunate me with work that I do, in fact, love. Work that I understand as a calling, in fact. So, you'd think Jobs' point would resonate. But here's why it doesn't: someone like me had a grandmother who began working in sweatshops at the age of 13 to help support her parents and sisters. My father's mother was a homemaker and with my grandfather, raised 7 children. He was a janitor and sometimes mason. My mother's father was a butcher. So, someone like me is one generation away from solidly working class and hears "Do what you love" through the filter of the seamstress, the homemaker, the butcher and the janitor who all dwell in my DNA.

I don't know that my grandparents loved what they did. I do know that they took pride in what they did. As the poet describes: the work they did was "The kind of work you work hard at, not because you love it, but

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because you have to, and, for some of us, you want to do it well.”

Let’s dig a little deeper and ponder what exactly it is about that Steve Jobs off-quoted idea that rubs the fur the wrong way. As it turns out, there’s no shortage of opinions out there.

To start, one writer points out that Jobs uses the words “you” and “your” 8 times in four sentences. It’s an inwardly focused piece of encouragement. She says,

*[B]y portraying Apple as a labor of his individual love, Jobs elided the labor of untold thousands in Apple’s factories, hidden from sight on the other side of the planet—the very labor that allowed Jobs to actualize his love. This erasure needs to be exposed. While DWYL seems harmless and precious, it is self-focused to the point of narcissism. (“In the Name of Love” by Miya Tokumitsu. Jacobian)*

Them’s fightin’ words. She’s onto something. We none of us are “self-made” and “Do what you love” upholds the myth that we are: the myth of the self-made individual who through their hard work alone *make* it on their own somehow without the support and labor of others - in Steve Jobs case, *“the labor of untold thousands in Apple’s factories, hidden from sight on the other side of the planet—the very labor that allowed Jobs to actualize his love.”*

But how we do love the “self-made” story.

And then there’s the poet who observes that Americans are “a little in love with work.” Some Americans are “a little in love with work.” It’s a class thing. By and large – I’m painting with broad strokes here – by and large, educated, relatively well-off people are a little in love with work. Are more likely to search for a hook into someone they’re meeting for the first time through what this person does for work. Like this: maybe you meet someone new –and right away you ask,

“So, what do you do?”

Maybe what they do doesn’t have a lot – or *anything* - to do with what they love. Maybe a better hook might be found in a different question. Maybe instead of “What do you do?” we might appropriate “Do what you love” and ask:

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“So, what do you love to do?”

Maybe we'd find an enlightened person who ignored the advice to do what you love.

That was actually the title of an article that was particularly on point. Interestingly enough, the article appeared in *Forbes* magazine. Titled, “Five Reasons to Ignore the Advice to Do What You Love”, (Rob Asghar) the third reason especially grabbed me not least because the writer quotes Thomas Merton, the revered Trappist monk.

Number three: *The search for one's passion can be a distraction from living in the present.*

He explains:

*Fifty years before Steve Jobs told college graduates to ceaselessly search for their true passion, the great Trappist monk Thomas Merton observed, 'The world is full of unsuccessful businessmen who still secretly believe they were meant to be artists or writers or actors in the movies.' Merton exhorted others instead to find meaning in an imperfect present moment.*

*'Who is willing to be satisfied with a job that expresses all his limitations?' Merton asked. 'He will accept such work only as a 'means of livelihood' while he waits to discover his 'true vocation.'"*

Or, as the poet said at the start:

*... I feel as if I have two jobs—the one that feeds my bank account, and the one that feeds all those intangible parts of me.*

Like so many people, especially so many people living in a shaky economy, the poet makes a living and then makes time for the work that she loves: writing poetry. She's living in the present. She's living honestly in her reality. There's no failure in that. She's doing what she loves and she's supporting herself making a living.

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On the inside one can see out. But those on the outside cannot wholly see into our hearts and minds through the lens of the work we do. Even if we're lucky enough to have made, in the words of the poet Robert Frost "avocation and vocation one in sight", ("Two Tramps in Mud Time" by Robert Frost) our work is still not the whole of us.

Labor Day is the day set aside to honor workers. All workers. "All labor has dignity," said Rev. Dr. King.

We honor the workers whose lives are reflected in what they love and their pride reflected in what they do.

Blessed be. Amen

**Readings that inspired and informed the sermon:**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/04/do-what-you-do-love-what-you-love/>

[http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2014/01/do\\_what\\_you\\_love\\_love\\_what\\_you\\_do\\_an\\_omnipresent\\_mantra\\_that\\_s\\_bad\\_for\\_work.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2014/01/do_what_you_love_love_what_you_do_an_omnipresent_mantra_that_s_bad_for_work.html)

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/robashghar/2013/04/12/five-reasons-to-ignore-the-advice-to-do-what-you-love/2/#3cbc88f2e4c6>

[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2014/09/the\\_self\\_made\\_man\\_history\\_of\\_a\\_myth\\_from\\_ben\\_franklin\\_to\\_andrew\\_carnegie.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2014/09/the_self_made_man_history_of_a_myth_from_ben_franklin_to_andrew_carnegie.html)